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WAR COMMITTEE.

Meeting held at 10, Downing Street, on Thursday,
December 16, 1915, at 11.30 A.M.

Evidence of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Mark Sykes, Bart., M.P.,
on the Arab Question.

2, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,

December 17, 1915.

EVIDENCE OF LIEUTENANT-COLONEL SIR MARK SYKES, BART., M.P.,
ON THE ARAB QUESTION.

1. THE PRIME MINISTER: Sir Mark Sykes, you have been good enough to come and give us your views on the Arab question. You have been very recently in this part of the world: where have you been?—A. I went to Sofia for a short time, then to the Headquarters at the Dardanelles. From there I went to Alexandria, from there to Aden, then back to Egypt, then back to Aden, then to Simla, and then I was eight weeks with the Mesopotamia Field Force, and called at all the Persian Gulf ports on both sides. I stayed about a week in Egypt on my way back, I missed the connection. I sent a Memorandum, which has been circulated, which gave what I had observed until the 28th October; but, of course, subsequent events have altered anything one had to say on military questions, though, I think, the political questions remain as they were before. With regard to the Arab question, the fire, the spiritual fire, lies in Arabia proper, the intellect and the organising power lie in Syria and Palestine, centred particularly at Beirut. I should like also to mention that the intellectual movement, which is behind the Arab movement, is not revolutionary like the Young Turk, because education in Syria, unlike modern education in India and in Turkey, has been confined in Syria to the property-owning classes, and consequently you have not a lot of very poor men who have got a little education and greater ambitions. That is an important point with regard to the intellectual force at the back of this movement.

In the Mosul district the movement is influenced by the Kurds, but east of the Tigris the Kurds are pro-Arab. If we come to the region of Diarbekir, and to that north of Aleppo, the Arab movement is spoiled to a great extent by the Armenian question and by Turkish influence. It is spoiled in this way—that there is not so much chance of co-operation between Christian and Moslem, and the Turk gets some Arabs on the Turkish side against the Arabs. In Mesopotamia, as I put in my Memorandum, the Arabs round Kerbela and to the south of Bagdad are very much cut off from the rest of the Arab movement by Shiism—by the Shia religion. They have a certain sense of race and breed, but they do not fall in with the other people.

2. THE PRIME MINISTER: Are the Arabs all Sunnis?—A. Practically the rest of the Arabs, except at Kerbela and south of Bagdad, are all Sunnis.

3. LORD KITCHENER: Wahabism, does that still exist?—A. I think it is a dying force.

4. MR. LLOYD GEORGE: Is that a Mohammedan sect?—A. It is a Sunni sect. With regard to the organisation, the motive force, like the Committee of Union and Progress, is in the army. I have talked to a great many army officers, prisoners of war, from the Damascus corps, from Mosul and from Bagdad, and they seem all at one, though, of course, they are frightened by the Committee of Union and Progress. They all have hostages in Turkish hands—wives and children, who would be sacrificed if they came out with very much support. With regard to the Kurdish officers, coming from the east of the Tigris, I think they are nearly all at one with the Arab officers. The ideal, running through nearly all the military members of the organisation, is nationalism and religious equality. All the officers I have spoken to want to bring in the Arab-speaking Christians and to give them religious equality. That is a strong feeling.

5. MR. BALFOUR: Equality with the Mohammedans?—A. Yes, the Arab army officers want to establish an Arab State in which the Christians shall be recognised as Arabs first, and not to go on religious lines. The second force is that of the Syrian Christians, like Dr. Faris Nimr and others, and certain Syrian Moslem intellectuals, and a few religious leaders who, I think, are very fine people, like the Grand Mufti at Damascus, who protested against the order of retaliation on local

Christians. They, also, have the same ideas as the army officers. A third force is the uneducated notables at places like Hama, Homs, Bagdad, and Nablus, who are bigoted, and who want to establish an Arab State which shall be a Mohammedan State, and a good many of the Ulema and religious leaders are on their side. That is the old school. The last force is the Arabs of Hejaz. Wherever they are, nomadic Arabs, there it is a sense of breed, and they are not fanatical, and they would fall in with the Sherif, as would also a large section of the Kurds. There are two common factors to the whole of the four of those schools of thought. One is that they *must* ask for theoretical independence, otherwise, if they ask for an obvious European tutelage, the Committee of Union and Progress will take the reactionary party over on their side. The other is that practically all the Arabs are pro-English and not anti-French, but frightened of the French. They have obtained a great deal of their culture from the French, but they are frightened of financial exploitation, and they are frightened of French colonial methods: that is, bringing a lot of French, Italians, Portuguese, and other people to colonise; and the Christians are as afraid of them at the bottom of their hearts as the Moslems. They like the French, they like French culture, but they are frightened of French methods.

6. LORD KITCHENER: Do you speak of Syria?—A. That feeling, Sir, is prevalent everywhere, because there has been so much propaganda by Syrians, and they know what the French do, so that feeling runs pretty well all through. If I may say so, the chief difficulty seems to be the French difficulty, and the root of that, I think, to speak frankly, lies in Franco-Levantine finance. Vitali represents the French group which used to be at Constantinople, who is in touch with M. Hugenin, who is a Swiss, and he is in touch with the Bagdad Railway, and they have had a great many relations with Javid. They have obtained the Syrian railways, and that very big loan of 1914, which gave them immense concessions all over Turkey. Now that party, I feel, is working through two agencies, and is checking the *Entente* policy in the Near East. One is the French cleric, which is sentiment.

7. THE PRIME MINISTER: What is that?—A. The French Nationalist party, which is sentimental, bearing in mind the crusades. I think that that financial group works upon a perfectly honest sentiment. On the other side, they work on the fears of the French colonial party of an Arab Khalifate, which will have a common language with the Arabs in Tunis, Algeria, and Morocco. The French machinery in Tunis, Algeria, and Morocco has been very satisfactory, but they are afraid, I think, of a Khalifate, or an independent State, speaking the same language as their Mohammedans. I think at the back of all this, the influence that is moving them, is sinister. I think that the financiers have three objects: I think they believe that if the *Entente* wins they want to have Syria, Palestine, and North Mesopotamia. M. Picot's request for the vilayet of Mosul suggests to me that they want also to get the Suj Bulak Pass and link up with the Trans-Persian Railway. I think that is their ambition if the *Entente* wins. I think their ambition, if the *Entente* fights only to a draw, is to maintain Turkey intact, and work the 1914 concessions that were got on that loan, and the Syrian railways, for all they are worth. I believe that they think, that, if the *Entente* loses the game, they will be able to square, through M. Hugenin, with the Germans later on. That is my feeling of what I take to be a very evil force working two honest forces, which are unconscious of the real purport of it. I think, to meet that, we require diplomacy which would be able to show great sympathy with the clerical feeling in France, and to point out that if matters are allowed to drift they will lose their real anchorage in Syria, owing to the anticipated massacre of the Syrian Christians in the same way that the Armenians were massacred. I think it should be pointed out to the French colonial party that, if the Arabs come under the influence of the Committee of Union and Progress, they will be much more formidable to them than they will under their own Sherif, when they will be quarrelling amongst themselves, as they always do.

Lastly, I come to the Indian Moslems. With regard to the Indian Moslems there is an anti-Arab feeling in India; that is undoubted. I think it is almost a natural dislike which exists between Indian and Arab; the types of mind are so different, and I think also that it is partly owing to the propaganda of the Committee of Union and Progress. It is the same in Egypt; and Masri, who was almost a hero in Egypt at one time, has now to live alone; he has had to leave the family to which he belonged, and has had to go into a part of his own, because he is prohibited. All we have to do with regard to India is not to mix ourselves up with religious squabbles which have to do with the Khalifate. With regard to any Mohammedans who are our

friends, as the Arabs wish to be, I think that we should back our friends. It is no use not backing our friends because people who have been influenced by our enemies dislike them. Before I leave that I should like to mention the fact, I think the Prime Minister will remember, that when he made his speech, I think at Birmingham, the French financiers mobilised to pay for Enver's advance at Adrianople—that was through the Ottoman Tobacco Régie Company—and the Indian Moslem machinery was set in motion.

8. THE PRIME MINISTER: The Indian Moslems began when?—A. An agitation began to appear in the papers and the books of the Indian Mohammedan press, and there was a general movement against our Adrianople policy. Those two forces, *i.e.*, French Levantine finance and Indian Mohammedanism, mobilised to protect Adrianople.

9. THE PRIME MINISTER: It was a very unfortunate *démarche*. It was made on the best information and with the best intentions. It was about 1913, was it not?—A. I think it was.

10. MR. BALFOUR: What did the Prime Minister say?—A. He warned the Turks not to go to Adrianople, and those two forces in Egypt and in India—those two machines—were set in motion, and the French financiers came forward and paid for Enver's advance. I think the same forces came into motion when Constantinople was threatened; there was a certain agitation in India and in Egypt, and, if I remember rightly, the French financiers reminded us that they had 30 per cent. of the Bagdad Railway; and I feel—not openly, but underneath—that those two forces are mobilised against anything happening in Syria.

Now I should like just to conclude by putting before you the dangers that I think confront us if matters are allowed to slide. If we adopt a perfectly passive attitude in the face of this, the Sherif, I think, will be killed.

11. MR. BALFOUR: Will be what?—A. Will be killed, and a Committee of Union and Progress nominee will be put in his place. That gives the Turks and the Germans Mecca. The Christians in Syria will be exterminated, as the Armenians have been exterminated. I am sure it is a mistake to imagine that hitting Turks urges them to kill Christians. It is going away that produces the massacres. They did not touch the Armenians until the Russians were fairly back in the Caucasus: and I can give a reason for this. Massacres are generally carried out by notables and mobs, and if the notables and the mobs think that there is any prospect of Christian soldiers appearing within three or four months, while there is still evidence of their crime, they hesitate to commit it for fear of retaliation. The anti-Committee elements will be destroyed among the Arabs, the intellectual Arabs will be hanged and shot, and the officers that matter will be exterminated too. The Arab machine will be captured and the ignorant notables and the fanatical people will then alone be left, and they will become subservient to the Committee of Union and Progress, and the Germans will then oblige the Turks to combine terrorism with concessions to the ideal of Arab nationality. Already Mr. Koch, of the German Consulate at Aleppo, is beginning to talk of Turco-Arabia, and I understand that Baron Oppenheim is on the same path. I think that we shall live to see Islam pretty solid; then we shall be confronted with the danger of a real Jihad. Mesopotamia may become a scene of major operations if we intend to hold on there, and a stream of people going uninterruptedly to Persia, to Afghanistan, and considerable unrest in India and the Soudan; and, remember, that next year, if the war is in progress, the Indian pilgrims will go to a Committee Sherif, and not to a Sherif who is known to be well disposed to us. That is, the Indian pilgrims will be going to Mecca. I know that the idea is strongly held that success in the West means our being able to dictate in Syria and elsewhere. I think if it was only a military problem that would be so, but I think with the existence of this French-Levantine financial influence, that there is always a chance at the last moment, although having great success in the West, of the French financiers preserving a *status quo* in the Ottoman Empire, and that means ending the war with grave danger—*post-war*—to India, Egypt, and to the *Entente*, if Russia is unsatisfied in regard to an open port. I do not want to make any suggestions, except on very general lines; but I feel we ought to settle with France as soon as possible, and get a definite understanding about Syria. Secondly, to organise a powerful army in Egypt which is capable of taking the offensive; and, thirdly, to co-ordinate our Eastern operations. Get that as one machine, and one definite

problem : link up Aden, Mesopotamia—the whole of that as one definite problem for the duration of the war. If we had that I think it is worth backing the Arabs, no matter what ground we may have lost to the north of Haifa. It is worth backing the Sherif party of the Arabs in Damascus and in Lebanon—and those who escape massacre—and also, I think, it is worth considering where we are going to be on the defensive and where on the offensive. I feel that Egypt should be the base of offensive operations, because the climate is good, and it is a good place to keep and train troops, and I think that as Bagdad has slipped from our grasp, apparently for some time, that Mesopotamia is a field of operations where we should be on the defensive, or use as few troops as possible, because an army based on Basra, where all the field hospitals and sick are, where cent. per cent. get fever sooner or later, is in a very difficult position when fighting an army which is based on Bagdad, where, although the days are very hot, nearly all nights are cool, and it is not hot for a long time—not more than six weeks.

12. MR. BALFOUR: What sort of an arrangement would you like to have with the French? What would you say to them?—A. I should like to retain for ourselves such country south of Haifa as was not in the Jerusalem enclave, which I gather the French themselves admit. I think it is most important that we should have a belt of English-controlled country between the Sherif of Mecca and the French.

13. THE PRIME MINISTER: You mean the whole way from the Egyptian frontier to Haifa, except the enclave?—A. I think it could be argued to the French that they were not giving up very much, assuming the enclave is large enough to contain the head of the Dead Sea and enough of the Jordan for the pilgrims to go to.

14. MR. BALFOUR: What do you leave the French in Syria?—A. That leaves the French from the "e" in Acre up to as far as they like to go round the Gulf of Alexandretta.

15. LORD KITCHENER: They want to go right round?—A. If they include all that in Syria they might exclude a part elsewhere. They are only giving up what lies between Acre and the beginning of the Jerusalem enclave, which will be about 20 miles.

16. MR. BALFOUR: We have always regarded this 90 or 100 miles of desert upon her eastern side as a stronghold of Egypt; now you propose still further east of that to give us a bit of inhabited and cultivated country for which we should be responsible. At first sight it looks as if that would weaken and not strengthen our position in Egypt.

LORD KITCHENER: I think that what Sir Mark Sykes means is that the line will commence at the sea-coast at Haifa. These Arabs will then come under our control, whereas if we are off the line we lose control over the south.

17. MR. BALFOUR: What do you mean to give exactly?—A. I should like to draw a line from the "e" in Acre to the last "k" in Kerkuk.

18. MR. LLOYD GEORGE: Do you propose that this should be the first step before you take any military action?—A. I think it is essential that we should know where we are.

19. Q. Before you begin?—A. I think we should begin to prepare for military action.

20. Q. Is it your idea that there should be a great offensive in Egypt, which will sweep up into Syria?—A. Well, Sir, I do not like to dictate.

21. Q. With regard to the proposition you put before us, that we should be on the defensive in Mesopotamia, but that we should be on the offensive in Egypt, what does the offensive mean there? because you said something about supporting the Arabs in Damascus and Lebanon. You could not support them without troops?—A. You would have to send out troops.

22. Q. It means a great offensive from Egypt sweeping up through Syria?

MR. BALFOUR: Unless you land in Syria?—A. Yes.

23. MR. LLOYD GEORGE: I take it that you mean Egypt?—A. I mean Egypt would be a storehouse for the troops.

24. Q. You might attack from Alexandretta?—A. From Alexandretta, or across the Sinai Peninsula, as has been done on several occasions.

25. Q. By a small force?—A. Yes.

26. Q. Have you ever had a great force?—A. I do not want to confuse the question by going into great antiquity, but there have been very large armies.

27. LORD KITCHENER: Ibrahim Pasha's force, for instance.—A. Yes, Sir.

28. MR. LLOYD GEORGE: You suggest in your memorandum that we might have 150,000 Turkish troops in Syria; if the enemy attack Egypt, we should require a very large force on our side, should we not?—A. Again I would rather not discuss the military details, because I do not want to impose my ideas, which are those of an amateur. But, there are many opportunities; for instance, you have the advantage of Cavalry.

29. MR. LLOYD GEORGE: I suppose you discussed even military questions with those who were competent to form an opinion when you were out there?—A. Yes, I did.

30. Q. It is a military proposition, is it not?—A. They all strongly hold the idea of making a landing at Alexandretta.

31. Q. You mean the Egyptian soldiers?—A. Yes, they have always held that opinion.

LORD KITCHENER: They are strongly of that opinion. If you cannot come to an arrangement with France, may you not be straining your relations with France very gravely if you assume you have come to an agreement with them and take action in Syria? My opinion is that before it can become a military problem we must know what the French actually demand—not what they demand, but what they insist upon having. They demand the whole of Syria. Their demands are very much indeed as Sir Mark Sykes has told us, but how much will they give way on that? If they give nothing, all these operations will be taking place and be a source of the gravest anxiety to us.

MR. LLOYD GEORGE: It cannot be a military proposition merely.

LORD KITCHENER: It cannot be a military proposition until the diplomatic proposition is settled. With regard to Alexandretta, the French officers told me it was not with any intention of considering their interests in Syria that it was rejected, but just as we in France do not claim France because we have troops holding positions there, so with regard to Syria. They are guests in a country and we recognise them as such.

THE PRIME MINISTER: That will not do.

MR. LLOYD GEORGE: We are not quite as simple as that.

32. THE PRIME MINISTER: We must have a political deal. We must come to terms with the French, which means we must come to terms diplomatically.—A. Quite so.

33. Q. I wonder at the present moment if they are inclined to allow us to get good terms out of them?—A. I think that we have those two assets. I think that we can play on the French colonial if we work it well: get it into the French colonial's head what a Committee of Union and Progress Sherif means, and point out what they have done in India and what they might do elsewhere. I think the French clerical is quite capable of being influenced by reason of the danger to his one asset in Syria, and if you rob the occult French financial force of its two agencies, then, I think, you are on the high road to a settlement. Certainly the two people I have talked to, M. de France in Cairo and Captain St. Quentin, who was a member of the French Military Mission, have both admitted those two propositions, and have certainly seemed to change their ideas. They began by taking the view of Senator Frandin. That is,

that France should have practically everything, and they admit that giving up to Acre is giving up very little—only that small strip. It must be remembered that the desert does not end with the Egyptian frontier; the desert comes right up to Hebron. It is not taking anything away from them if we sacrifice even Hauran to them.

Note.

Sir Mark Sykes desired that the following opinion, which he had omitted from his evidence, might be added :—

“ I am of opinion that passive defence of Egypt, with its natural sequels, will necessitate the eventual despatch to India and Egypt of a larger number of troops than under the scheme of building up in Egypt *now* a force capable of offensive action.”
